

## **Parents as “Help Labor”: Inner-City Teachers’ Narratives of Parent Involvement**

**By Mary Christianakis**

### **Introduction**

This article examines teachers’ perceptions of parent involvement through the narratives of 15 racially and linguistically diverse teachers who worked together at Jefferson Elementary,<sup>1</sup> an inner-city school in Northern California composed mostly of African-American, Latino, and Asian students. One overarching research question framed the qualitative study: How do teachers at an inner-city elementary school perceive parents and parental involvement?

Analyzing teachers’ constructions of parental involvement allows for a deeper understanding of how teachers in under-resourced inner-city schools seek to utilize parents, as well as what kinds of activities teachers emphasize that may be different from well-documented parent involvement or volunteer practices of middle class school communities. Understanding teachers’ perspectives of their working relationships with parents at under-resourced inner-city schools can also help illuminate potential collaborations as well as possible tensions between teachers and working class parents.

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What is more, given that credential programs throughout the country require that teacher candidates understand how to involve minority families in schools (e.g., California’s SB 2042, CLAD), the present study may help teacher educators and their students explore

how particular parent involvement models inform teacher-parent relationships, involvement practices, and interactional patterns, particularly for those who work in urban settings. If future teachers are to involve parents in meaningful ways, they must come to understand how the perceptions and practices of parent involvement are mediated by both the reality of parents' lives and the constraints of particular school contexts.

Before moving on to the findings, I ground this discussion in a brief review of parent involvement research. Specifically, I discuss the research that explores involvement of minority and low-income families in schools, as well as the literature on school partnerships and school empowerment models. Following the literature review, I detail the methods used to collect the interview data. The findings illustrate how the teachers employed neither partnership nor empowerment models, but instead, used parent labor to accomplish their teaching work. Finally, I discuss the implications for teacher education.

### **Literature Review**

Parent involvement in poor inner-city schools educating minority youth is relatively lower and of a different quality than it is in White middle class schools, a fact that has received much attention in the academic literature (Auerbach, 2007; Lareau, 1989; Lareau, 2003). Research explaining why working class minority parents are not as “involved” as their middle-class White counterparts has moved beyond the cultural deficit arguments promulgated by Coleman (1966) and Moynihan (1969), which blamed minority family cultures, claiming that these parents cared little about the formal education of their children. Deficit approaches have been challenged over the last 40 years by pointing out that Eurocentric cultural interpretations of families have been privileged in the research literature on parental involvement (see Ascher, 1994; Auerbach, 1995; Biddle, 2001; De Gaetano, 2007; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Lightfoot, 1978; Ramirez, 2000; Scott-Jones, 1995; Yosso 2005). More contemporary and culturally relevant arguments focus on why and how poor minority parents, in some cases, may come to feel isolated, ignored, and unwelcomed in schools (Bempechat, 1992; Cooper & Christie, 2005; Lawson, 2003; Rich, 1987; Trotman, 2001). Additionally, studies demonstrate that long work hours, the holding of multiple jobs, and other familial responsibilities conflict with the hours that urban schools make available for parent involvement (Coots, 1998; Lareau, 1987; 1994; Peña, 2000; Smalley & Reyes-Blanes, 2001; Waanders, Méndez, & Downer, 2007). Furthermore, local barriers in poor inner city communities, such as issues of community safety and availability of transportation and childcare, continue to pose challenges to parent involvement (Drummond & Stipek, 2004).

Though much research has dispelled cultural deficit models of minority families in poor communities, scholars continue to find a persistent and widespread belief among some teachers that low-income African-American and Latino parents do

not want to be involved in their children's education (Chrispeels & Rivero, 2001; Chavkin, 1993; De Gaetano, 2007; García & Guerra, 2004; Peña 2000; Valdés, 1996). Some researchers argue that such interpretations correlate to the *increasing* numbers of middle-class White teachers in schools with high minority enrollment (Cooper & Jordan, 2003). As possible outsiders to minority communities, White teachers may have particular expectations of parent involvement that reflect their own socioeconomic status and life experiences (Graue, 2005). García and Guerra (2004) find that all teachers (White and minority) use middle class parent involvement practices as a standard. Consequently, poor and minority children and parents are treated as though they have the same resources and life experiences as White, middle class parents (Crozier, 2001). Additionally, teachers' own experiences with schools may influence their perceptions that low parent involvement in minority communities indicates a de-valuing of education (Thompson, 2003). In effect, by making White middle class the standard of comparison, and by not including ethnic diversity in the structures of schooling, some educators perpetuate a tacit structural classism and racism.

Scholarship conducted over the past 35 years has shown consistently that levels and types of parent involvement depend on the socioeconomic status of parents and teachers (Moles, 1993; Vaden-Kiernan & McManus, 2005), and that gaps in parent involvement reflect profound differences in the role education plays in the lives of many working-class and middle-class families (Lareau, 1987, 2000; O'Connor, 2001). For example, Lareau (1994) argues that parents in some working class communities show deference and respect by leaving the intellectual work to the teacher, who is typically a member of the middle class; a deference that middle class teachers misinterpret as low involvement and lack of support. Teachers often impose middle class models as normative parent participation and criticize parents who do not meet their expectations for involvement. As a result, teachers do not invite parents to be involved (Bloom, 2001). Teachers who have narrow visions of parent involvement, negative proclivity toward parents, cultural differences with parents, and lack of teacher training reiterate negative stereotypes of low-income minority parents (DeCastro-Ambrocetti & Cho, 2005; Valdez, 1996).

The academic literature also indicates that parent involvement is tied to parent-teacher relationships and communication, which varies across cultures. For example, some research finds that working class Latino parents believe the teacher is responsible for initiating communication, whereas many teachers believe that parents should initiate contact (Ramírez, 2000). Additionally, teachers often unwittingly construct barriers that hamper minority parents' participation by not communicating regularly with parents, not explaining homework policies, as well as not valuing the home languages and cultures of the children (Quiocho & Daoud; 2006; Valdés, 1996).

**Parent Involvement Models**

In the mainstream research, parent involvement is often credited with increasing the positive behavior and high academic achievement of children (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). In addition to higher test scores, increased parent involvement is linked to positive social and emotional behaviors, motivation, social competence and peer relationships (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Palenchar, Vondra, & Wilson, 2001; Sanders, 1998). There are also communication benefits for teachers and parents (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995; Trotman, 2001) and there is evidence that greater parental involvement increases teacher efficacy (García, 2004). Parent involvement has also been found to empower minority parents (Pérez, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005; Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006) by organizing them and helping them to voice collective opinions and concerns. Benefits of parent involvement, however, are contingent upon relationships and shared understandings of what parent involvement means in the local context (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995).

While the benefits of parental involvement are well documented for students, parents, and teachers, definitions and enactments of parental involvement continue to vary. Parent involvement definitions draw upon two distinct models: (1) the parent-teacher partnership model and (2) the parent empowerment model. Partnership models seek to align parents with teachers, while empowerment models advocate for decision-making opportunities. Missing from these models is a substantive acknowledgement and qualitative description of how under-resourced inner-city schooling contexts influence how teachers perceive their relationships with parents and define parental involvement.

**Parent-teacher partnership models.** Parent partnerships aim to “help all families establish home environments to support children as students” (Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005 p. 79). Partnership models argue that when parents and teachers work as partners, children have better schooling experiences (e.g., Epstein, 2001; Ferrara & Ferrara, 2005; García, 2004; Henderson, 1987; Snow, Hemphill, & Barnes, 1991; Strickland, 2004). Epstein (2001) offers a model that outlines six components for home-school partnerships: (1) *Parenting*: to encourage and support learning at home; (2) *Communication*: to exchange information between home and school; (3) *Volunteering*: to recruit and train parents to help in school; (4) *Learning at Home*: to train parents for homework and to create learning environments at home; (5) *Decision Making*: to involve parents in school governance, such as the PTA, committees, and councils; and (6) *Collaborating with Community*: to coordinate resources and work from civic organization & businesses to strengthen and bolster school learning. Parent partnership models aim to align home practices with the goals and work of schooling.

As egalitarian as the notion of “partnership” sounds, the parent partnership models can be problematic. These models presuppose that parents want to change

their home lives to mirror school practices. They also assume that the parents have the time, skills, and will to “partner” with teachers. By making assumptions about parents, these models reinforce asymmetrical power between teachers and parents (de Carvalho, 2001). Additionally, typically, partnership models are based on the involvement practices of middle class parents (Epstein, 2001). Consequently, some parent involvement models operate on a “deficit hypothesis,” as they seek to change home practices, which are viewed as culturally inferior to middle class practices, so that they align with school life (Auerbach, 1989; Valdés, 1996). Yet, teachers feel comfortable relying on such models (Graue, 2005), in part because their assumptions and views of what is appropriate parent involvement behavior and communication draw from middle class values (Christopher, 1996) related to individualism, upward mobility, and volunteerism. However, as Lightfoot (1978) documented, sometimes parents and teachers can be “worlds apart” in their perspectives about what good parental involvement means.

**Parent empowerment models.** Like the parent partnership models, the parent empowerment models aim to improve parent involvement. Unlike the partnership models, however, the parent empowerment models seek to minimize asymmetrical power employed by schools, anticipate misunderstandings, and build on children’s home cultures, thus helping parents to participate in school decision-making (Fine, 1993). In this way, empowerment models move beyond partnerships that only accomplish school goals by supporting parents to influence policies, practices, and power structures (Hulsebosch & Logan, 1998). School communities that use empowerment models construct parent involvement based on local needs within the community by involving the parents in multiple levels of decision-making, and by inviting them to define their own involvement at each level of decision-making.

Empowerment models attempt to work with parents in ways that give them numerous opportunities to participate in creating a school environment where children can learn, play, and feel safe. Research finds that such approaches can yield positive outcomes. Inner-city African-American parents participate in programs that emphasize empowerment, outreach, and non-traditional, indigenous resources from the community (Abdul-Adil & Farmer, 2006). Additionally, Moll (1994) finds that teachers in working class, Spanish-speaking, Latino communities can learn from and draw upon the community’s “funds of knowledge,” which involve the collective strength and wisdom of neighbors, friends, and family. By incorporating these funds into classroom experiences, teachers can involve parents more, and the parents might feel more connected to the school community.

Nonetheless, enacting parent empowerment is complicated. It requires a high degree of social interaction and networking (Sheldon, 2002) and may necessitate on-site community liaisons to help parents advocate for their children (Clark & Dorris, 2006). Empowerment also requires parents to use their capital (e.g., time, social) to mediate school spaces (e.g., conferences, events, meetings) (Calabrese Barton,

Drake, Perez, & St. Louis, 2004). However, as empowerment models acknowledge, some school officials may not be open to the parents’ critical involvement (Perez, Drake, & Calabrese Barton, 2005; Quiocho & Daoud, 2006).

Both the partnership and empowerment models offer possibilities for parent involvement. Partnership models recommend that schools shape and influence home practices and rely on collaboration between parents and teachers. Empowerment models, on the other hand, ask that parents not only collaborate to meet school needs, but also define their community needs by acting as stakeholders that shape school practices, policies and pedagogies. Proponents of both models argue that such approaches create solidarity and joint purpose between parents and teachers. Nonetheless, neither model accounts for the possibility that school resources (especially in under-resourced schools) and parents’ lives may mediate teacher-parent relationships and their perceptions of one another. In this study, I was interested in examining how teachers working in an inner-school setting conceptualized parent involvement. I was especially interested in the extent to which their views on parent involvement were reflected in the literature on parent involvement.

## **Methods**

The data presented in this article are part of a larger qualitative study on teacher-parent relationships at Jefferson Elementary, an inner city school in the East San Francisco Bay. To understand teachers’ perceptions of parent involvement at Jefferson, I audio recorded interviews with 15 teachers at lunch and after school over a period of six months.

### ***Jefferson Elementary School***

At the time of the study, Jefferson had over 750 students attending kindergarten through fifth grade. The school was 98% students of color: 82% African American, 8% Latino, and 8% Asian. Ninety percent of the students received free or reduced lunch, an indication that the children were from poor, working-class families. Jefferson housed a transitional bilingual program from kindergarten through fifth. The California Department of Education had identified Jefferson as an underperforming school because of its Academic Performance Index (API) score of one. From 2000-2003, the state of California threatened to intervene if Jefferson could not meet average yearly progress (AYP) goals.

### ***Jefferson Teachers and Interviewing***

The Jefferson Elementary teaching faculty was racially diverse. There were 25 teachers on staff. Eight were African American, 13 were White, two were Asian-American, and two were Latino. Nineteen had taught at least five years and six had taught fewer than five years. Three of the newer teachers were Teach For America (TFA) participants in their first or second year of teaching. Only one of the TFA

participants chose to be in the study. Of all the teachers, only two lived within a 10-block radius; both were African American. Ten of the teachers did not want to participate in the study, in part, because of the tense school environment created by high stakes testing and the possibility that the State of California would take over Jefferson.

During the six-month period, three one-hour interviews were conducted with each of the 15 teachers (see Table 1). Semi-structured and open-ended interview questions guided the in-depth conversations about parent involvement at Jefferson Elementary School. The interviews began with a general discussion of the school context, the teacher's experience level, and the general temperament of the students in each particular teacher's class. After the general discussion, teachers responded to the following questions: (1) What is parent involvement? (2) What does parent involvement look like at Jefferson Elementary? and (3) What does parent involvement look like in your classroom? Follow-up questions emerged after each response to the initial interview questions and varied across teachers. Subsequent interviews probed teachers about specific parents and children discussed during the first interviews.

### Coding and Data Analysis

I employed thematic coding strategies (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to analyze the narrative interview transcriptions. From the thematic coding of the teacher narratives, the emic expression of *help* emerged as the dominant theme. Other narratives of parent involvement were linked to narratives about in school and at home parent participation. After thematic coding, I employed axial coding to ex-

Table 1

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Race</i>	<i>Experience</i>	<i>Grade Level</i>
Ms. Johnston	White	2 years (TFA)	4th grade
Ms. Peters	White	8 years	1st; Bilingual/Reading; Recovery
Mrs. Washington	African American	30 years	3rd grade
Mrs. Lau	Asian	23 years	Kindergarten
Mrs. Rodriguez	Latina	15 years	2nd grade
Ms. Williams	African American	28 years	4th grade
Ms. Adams	White	12 years	Kindergarten
Mr. Chang	Asian	9 years	1st grade
Mr. Espinoza	Latino	10 years	3rd/4th Sheltered
Mr. Smith	African American	18 years	2nd grade
Ms. Dessorne	White	12 years	1st/2nd
Mrs. Newsom	White	24 years	Kindergarten
Ms. Chandler	White	13 years	1st Sheltered
Ms. Rogers	White	22 years	3rd grade
Mrs. Martin	White	23 years	4th grade



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amine the data across etic themes in order to identify contexts, causes, actions, and interactions related to parent help (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through the process of axial coding, I differentiated *help at school* from *help at home*.

### **Findings**

While the research discussed earlier provides two models for parent involvement (partnership or empowerment), for the teachers at Jefferson neither model sufficiently captured their approach to parent involvement. At Jefferson, parent involvement was conceptualized mainly as “helping.” When asked about parent involvement, all 15 Jefferson teachers used the word “help” to describe parent involvement. In doing so, they positioned themselves as supervisors and the parents as *the helpers*.

The teacher’s conceptualization of “help” must be understood within the context of their under-resourced classrooms. Most of the teachers at Jefferson did not have teacher’s aides, nor did they have state-mandated paraprofessionals to help differentiate instruction and support special education students. As a result, the use of the term “help” to describe parent involvement suggests that teachers viewed the parents as assistants, rather than as partners who could complement their work and vice versa. Such conceptualizations of parent help stand in sharp contrast to parent partnership models employed in middle class communities, where helping teachers is just one of many aspects of productive partnerships (Epstein, 2001).

The findings section details how, based on their definition of parental involvement as “help,” teachers assigned the parents duties that both freed them—the teachers—to accomplish other teaching goals and lessened their teaching load. Teacher narratives identified parent involvement as “help” in two domains: at school and at home. At-school help ranged from working with students to assisting the teacher as follows:

- ◆ being available to the teacher during the day;
- ◆ participating in classroom activities and special projects;
- ◆ completing assigned tasks with children;
- ◆ communicating with the teacher regularly stapling and photocopying papers; and
- ◆ organizing and cleaning up materials.

Given that Jefferson housed a Spanish bilingual program, help also involved calling on upon Spanish-speaking parents to translate written materials and conversations during parent conferences.

Home “help” focused on support work classroom assignments, including explaining homework, reading with the children, providing a quiet place to work, and support for out of school activities; for example, taking and chaperoning the children on outings to the library and museums. Through the analysis of data on



both at school and at home help, I now turn to the response to my main research question: How do teachers at an inner-city elementary school perceive parents and parental involvement? Teachers in this school tended to view parents a *help labor* and parent involvement as in school and at home help.

Throughout the findings section, I use the term *help labor* to refer to two kinds of uncompensated work carried out by parents in order to make the teachers' work less laborious: (1) teacher-determined and teacher-assigned work that accomplishes the day-to-day curricular and clerical goals of the teachers and the school; and (2) teacher-expected instruction and academic enrichment activities that foster students' learning outside of school. Like volunteer work, *help labor* is uncompensated. Unlike volunteer work at schools, which is optional and may not necessarily include activities that supplement teachers' work, *help labor* is work that is essential for teachers to accomplish curricular goals. At school, *help labor* included work that was worthy of pay; that is, work that at other schools is typically done by teacher assistants or paraprofessional staff. Consequently, I differentiate *help labor* from unpaid labor and volunteer work to highlight that *help*, an emic term that emerged from the data, signifies a relationship, whereas unpaid labor stresses compensation.

The term *help labor* emphasizes the work parents performed so that their under-resourced school could meet daily instructional goals. While parent partnership models advocate for parents to assist in the classroom (Epstein, 2001), they do so in contexts with varied opportunities for participation. Such models approach parent involvement as augmenting classroom work, not as replacement labor. The following section explores how and why the teachers at Jefferson equated parent involvement with *help labor*.

#### **Parent Involvement as Help Labor at School**

Teachers identified various kinds of help as parent involvement at school, all of which required the parents to be available, generous, and flexible with their time—common expectations in White middle class and wealthy communities (Lareau, 1989). Conversely, Jefferson Elementary parents, all working class, held multiple jobs that paid hourly wages and thus, like other low-income parents, most of them could not volunteer in the ways their children's teachers expected (Peña, 2000; Waanders, Méndez, & Downer, 2007).

One of the salient narratives of in-class help emphasized the parents' availability and accessibility during the school day. According to all of the teachers, parents demonstrated support by staying in contact and communicating regularly. Mr. Smith, described one helpful parent as follows:

...Gerard's mom is supportive. She checks on him a lot. She calls me at home. She has even taken time off of work to help in the classroom. She came to the oratorical festival to support the kids and chaperone. If I could clone parents, I would certainly clone her.

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Gerard’s mother was both accessible and available to help Mr. Smith throughout the school day with art projects, science centers, and homework grading. Ms. Peters, a bilingual teacher, described how Ms. Estrada helped her every Monday by translating her weekly newsletter. While Ms. Peters was bilingual, she wanted to make sure that the weekly newsletter was grammatically correct and written in an appropriate style for parents. As a contrast to accessible parents, teachers described unavailable parents as “lacking interest” and “indifferent.”

According to Jefferson teachers, on-site availability and proactive communication helped prevent student failure and that prevention helped the teachers accomplish their work. Proactive parents took the initiative to ask about school tests and to prepare their children at home “before their child[ren] failed.” From the teachers’ perspective, it was the parents’ responsibility to ensure that the child was performing well and able to access instructional resources at school. As a result, Mrs. Martin praised a parent who would “stop in to verify her son’s homework assignments, because his [the son’s] handwriting was so sloppy.” Similarly, Mr. Chang expressed the teachers’ view of helpful parents when he described a student’s mother:

*Mr. Chang:* Demondre’s mom is great. I would have to say that she is the biggest parent advocate for her child. She is the most involved in my classroom. She comes in everyday. She tries to anticipate problems with her child before they happen. For instance, she wanted him to sit on the left side of the desk, because he is left-handed and she doesn’t want him hitting other students. She came in the first day of school and told me this. She also didn’t want him to sit next to a certain child that she knew from the community, so she had me change his seat early in the year.

*Interviewer:* Do you ever initiate contact?

*Mr. Chang:* I don’t really have to because she is in my classroom every day, so she knows what is going on with her kid—his strengths and his weaknesses.

Across all 15 teachers, proactive communication on the part of the parent and availability both on the campus and via the phone helped relieve teachers of the responsibility to maintain home communication and signaled to the teachers that education was a parental priority. Conversely, the teachers viewed a parent’s inaccessibility or absence as an indicator of his or her apathy or disdain for schooling.

Another salient narrative of in-class help described those parents who volunteered their time and labor as teachers’ aids. Thirteen of the 15 teachers described one to two parents whom they relied upon for instructional labor in the classroom. Instructional labor included teacher-assigned work, such as one-on-one tutoring with special needs students, “running a center,” conducting assessments in English and Spanish, and helping with special holiday projects. The parents who carried out instructional labor became exemplars used to criticize the lack of in-class instructional help from other parents. Teachers made no mention of the fact that “taking off work” to provide labor at school was not an available option to all

parents, especially those employed in hourly wage (not salaried) positions with less flexibility than occupations common in middle class communities (Waanders, Méndez, & Downer, 2007).

Helping special needs students was another common use of parental *help labor*. According to the teachers, the school district was supposed to provide a trained instructional assistant for special needs students; but due to the low pay of those positions, the school district could not attract employees, and few classes had aides. All 15 teachers struggled with properly assisting their special needs students and, as a result, they relied on parents to help these students focus, while they taught the main lesson. Mrs. Lau, a Kindergarten teacher, explained how one parent, Ms. Fellows, helped her manage boys that were “kind of wild” during class time:

When we are doing center time, Ms. Fellows will follow Donte and D’Andre, and I’ll take my two other boys. When Ms. Fellows doesn’t come, it is chaos. All it takes is one student.

Similarly, Mr. Espinoza, who taught a third-fourth grade class, also expressed his reliance on an in-class parent helper to “deal with” a boy he described as “emotionally disturbed”:

I don’t know what I would do without Wanda’s mom. That woman is amazing. She works the night shift at the hospital and then brings her daughter to school right after work and stays half of the day. Those are some long hours. I think she just wants to spend time with Wanda, even though she doesn’t get a chance to work with her that often. I have her sitting with Bruce. He’s emotionally disturbed. Let me tell you. Even his mom told me that she wants to put him in an institution. Wanda’s mom is real patient with him.

By assigning parents, such as Wanda’s mother and Ms. Fellows, to work with students who have specialized needs, teachers directed parents as though they were paid paraprofessionals.

All 15 teachers also relied on at least one parent to act as an assistant teacher or aid during small group work. The teachers assigned the following *help labor* to parents who assisted them: “running the computers,” leading a reading group, running a math center activity, reading to children, and managing holiday crafts. Here is how Mr. Chan described how one parent, Ms. K, helped at his literacy centers.

Having Ms. K in my room is like having another teacher. She comes in for my morning reading groups. She’ll take five students, and I’ll take five. It takes me about two minutes to bring her up to speed every day. In the afternoons, when I don’t have her there, I have to teach all ten students on my own, so I can’t do small guided reading groups as easily, because it’s hard to keep track of the kids.

Like Mr. Chan, Ms. Dessorne used parent labor to accomplish her objectives and work. More to the point, the parent read-aloud time she had set up at the end of the school day allowed her to focus on individual students and their homework:

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*Ms. Dessorne:* This year, I have about five parents who come to read aloud to the class in the afternoons. I had to run a little training for them so that they would stop and ask questions of the kids along the way. Sometimes I interrupt with questions along the way. They don't mind. I did this so that I would have a chance to comment on homework assignments.

Without the parental help, Ms. Dessorne and other teachers felt that their homework feedback would not be timely and, thus, not as useful to students and parents.

Teacher narratives also described how helpful parents regularly volunteered their time to accomplish classroom clerical and organizational duties, such as photocopying, stapling, organizing materials, and the recording of grades. Eleven of the 15 teachers recruited parent volunteers to help with clerical duties. Mrs. Washington, for example, shared that she has a parent volunteer put together her weekly homework packets every Friday afternoon:

She's a sweetheart. She works the lunch shift at [a restaurant] downtown, so she has about an hour to help me before going to work and sometimes she'll pass grades into my grade book.

Perhaps the most common stories were those referencing parents' absence from the school site, and their lack of assistance or “help” in the classroom. Narratives of parent absence were linked consistently with parent work status. All 13 teachers who identified some non-working parents as “welfare mothers,” for example, thought that these parents should spend their time in school. This is evidenced in Ms. Williams comment:

Well I have a parent this year who doesn't work. She has three children in this school, and we barely see her up here. When I told her to come help out in the children's classroom so that her children could do better in school, she said she didn't want to because she would miss her soap operas. She don't spend no time with her kids at home neither. She has the older children teaching the younger ones how to read.

Ms. Williams equated the parent's lack of classroom help with a lack of interest in education. According to Ms. Williams, as long as the mother was unemployed, she needed to be helping Ms. Williams and her child in the classroom and her child at home. Another teacher echoed Ms. Williams' sentiment:

Well if they come to the school, I may give them sets of papers to grade. They should be doing something because if they ain't working a job, they at least can work in school.

### ***Parent Involvement as Help Labor at Home***

According to the teachers' narratives, parents demonstrated parental involvement by helping, practicing, reinforcing, and supporting school learning at home. Given that the teachers were under pressure to improve standardized test scores,

literacy and mathematics were a curricular focus, not only in class, but also with homework. Specific activities the teachers identified as helpful parent involvement at home included engaging in literacy activities, such as reading literature, going to the library, and practicing phonics. Help also included working on arithmetic, using flashcards, paying for tutoring, not allowing videogames, and reinforcing appropriate school behavior. Conversely, teachers viewed lack of homework help, lack of literacy practice, and the expression of negative comments about schooling and teachers as evidence for lack of parent involvement. When parents did not do *help labor* at home, teachers saw them as working against school goals of test achievement in literacy and mathematics.

All 15 teachers mentioned home literacy as a key indicator of parent involvement at home. Parents who practiced literacy at home assisted the teacher in accomplishing teaching goals. One kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Lau, described how home literacy practice, even before school enrollment, indicated parental support of school goals:

*Mrs. Lau:* You can always tell if the parents value school and if they spend time helping the children learn.

*Interviewer:* How can you tell?

*Mrs. Lau:* Well, the children come to kindergarten and they know their letters and they know their numbers too. It's amazing. They also know stories. I have one little girl in my class, Celeste. She knows all her letters and sounds-- and she knew them before she started school. Her mom spends a lot of time with her. She really values school and learning.

*Interviewer:* How do you know that she spends a lot of time with her?

*Mrs. Lau:* Well, she told me, but you just know. She's great. She takes Celeste to the library every so often and Celeste brings in books for me to read to the class. It makes my job so much easier.

Celeste's mother acted as a teacher at home by teaching her daughter all of the letters and their sounds. Her focus on literacy amounted to *help labor* for the school, which was seeking to raise students' test scores. As a result, Mrs. Lau found her parental involvement in literacy to be more valuable than that of other parents who "waste[d] time playing videogames with their kids" or were "letting them run around at the [local] mall."

Another way that teachers perceived helpful parent involvement was through the active reinforcement of skills and knowledge introduced at school. Such reinforcement functioned as extended labor for the classroom teacher. Ten of the teachers identified practice with spelling and vocabulary words, and eight teachers discussed help with math facts as indicators of parent involvement. Ms. Rogers, a third grade teacher, explained why she viewed one parent as "so supportive and helpful":

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*Ms. Rogers:* Kevon’s mom is “on the ball.” She’s got a whole practice routine at home. She came to me after school the first week and asked me how I do spelling and math tests. I explained to her that I give weekly spelling words and we have a math test at the end of every unit. I send the spelling words home in the Monday packet. I also told her that we would be working on our multiplication tables.

*Interviewer:* So how was she helpful?

*Ms. Rogers:* Well then she asked me if she could take home some of those sentence strips to cut up as flashcards. Every week, she writes the words on the flashcards and has Kevon practice them with his grandma and older brother. She keeps coming back for more sentence strips. She color-coded the multiplication tables.

*Interviewer:* Do you see a difference between Kevon and the other kids?

*Ms. Rogers:* Most definitely. That kid is so smart. Keisha, his mom, told some of the other mom’s what she was doing, so now there’s a whole little group of them asking for sentence strips. I have had to raid the first grade teachers’ supply closet.

Keisha’s understanding of her child’s needs and her willingness to craft instructional materials influenced other parents and resulted in less work for Ms. Rogers, who linked student performance and success with parental support at home. When probed about how she believed that student gains were a result of parent involvement, she responded that she could “tell” when parents were not involved because they did not sign and return the children’s graded spelling tests. “Those kids,” she asserted do not do as well on the spelling test as students such as Kevon, whose mother helped at home.

Thirteen of the 15 teachers also identified supportive and helpful parents as those who provided a quiet workspace, free of interruptions or distractions. Mr. Smith, a second grade teacher rattled off all of the kinds of disruptions that many of his students encountered and how hard some parents worked to create home learning environments despite the inner city challenges:

*Mr. Smith:* Jefferson Elementary School, as you can see, is not in a quiet, cozy little suburb. There is a lot going on. Up the street they hold pit-bull fights at least a couple of days a week. There are liquor stores every other block and they attract a lot of drunks and drug addicts, prostitutes too. So there’s a lot going on in the streets. Parents need to contend with all of that. That’s why you see bars on the windows.

*Interviewer:* Ok, but how do those distractions on the street figure into homework time?

*Mr. Smith:* Well, first of all, you can hear everything. It’s not quiet and the cops are nowhere to be found when you need them. So the parents have to find a way to block it out...especially when there’s gunshots. And also, some families have multiple generations living in one house. Kiara, her mom and her older brother live in the grandma’s house, along with Kiara’s cousins and auntie. I think it’s challenging to find a quiet space to work.

*Interviewer:* So what do parents do?

*Mr. Smith:* Kiara's mom keeps all of her school supplies in a tub in her own bedroom. She's a nurse, and when she comes home from work, Kiara told me that they take out the box out and do homework together on the bed until it's time to go to sleep. She doesn't have a desk and a 'well lit' area, but she makes it work. She loves that little girl.

All 15 teachers associated parental support with positive learning environments at home, similar what is recommended in the middle class literature on parent involvement. On average, the teachers lauded two to three parents in each class for modeling their homes around school practices and for overcoming challenges of crowded households, disruptive neighborhoods, and long work hours. The teachers used such parents as paragons of parenting to castigate those parents who could not overcome environmental learning challenges at home.

The teachers viewed the parents' challenges in parallel with their own challenges as inner-city schoolteachers trying to meet academic demands with fewer material resources. When asked how they knew that the children did not have school materials at home, six out of the 15 teachers said that they knew because the students would steal crayons, pencils, paper or books from school. The other nine said that the children had told them. None of the teachers had ever conducted home visits. Nevertheless, the teachers were aware of financial challenges, and still pointed to the lack of materials at home as evidence of little parent involvement.

According to the teachers, helpful and involved parents were those that reinforced and reiterated classroom rules at home by punishing children for poor school behavior. For example, here is what Mr. Espinoza described as supportive:

Tiara's mom is supportive...I have called her at work a couple of times during the day to tell her that Tiara was misbehaving in class. She can't really talk all that much at work, so she would call me at home that night with Tiara standing next to her. That only had to happen a couple of times. Tiara's fine now. Yeah, there's a lot of follow-through between school and home.

Mr. Espinoza saw Tiara's mom as the executor of his disciplinary policies; thus, the continuity between school and home helped set clear expectations for Tiara's behavior. Mr. Espinoza's notion of support or help defined how parents should reinforce teacher rules at school, a common focus for teachers (e.g., Lawson & Briar-Lawson, 1997). Least supportive parents, according to many of the teachers, undermined school rules and taught their children to disrespect schooling by contradicting the teacher's directions and by arguing with the teacher in front of the children.

## Analysis

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers in one inner-city elementary school conceptualized parents and parent involvement. Jefferson elementary



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school was an under-resourced inner city school in which teachers often lacked the benefit of paraprofessionals and teachers’ aides. In such a context, parental *help labor* became a valuable asset to the classroom teacher. Whether they worked with special needs students, read aloud, translated school materials, ran small groups, or performed clerical work, teachers valued parent labor that helped reduce their own workload and compensated for resources, which the school district did not provide. During school hours, the parents, in effect, acted as regular teaching assistants, while the teachers positioned themselves as managers delegating tasks to employees. Interestingly enough, in their narratives, teachers did not draw a connection between their need for parental *help labor* with the absence of aides and paraprofessionals to support their workload.

On-site involvement during instruction privileged those parents, and the children of parents, who had the economic and temporal capacity to do *help labor*. As a result, teachers perceived those parents as being more involved and supportive of classroom goals. Conversely, those unable to carry out *help labor* in the classroom were not described as “helpful.” Instead, teachers deemed some parents as “welfare mothers,” and made assumptions and judgments about how they spent their daytime. Unfortunately, as shown in the research (Bloom, 2001), such negative assumptions of parents by teachers in inner city schools are commonplace. In addition, none of the teachers mentioned the possibility that these working class minority parents may not initiate contact out of deference to the teacher, as researchers have found (Lareau, 1994; Ramírez, 2000).

Teachers valued *help labor* at home that supplemented and supported the classroom curriculum, so that students came to school prepared—knowing and understanding the information even before instruction—thus lessening the workload of the teacher. The teacher narratives of parent involvement at home show how teachers favored parents who reinforced the school curriculum and disciplinary policies. In the teachers’ eyes, parents whose *help labor* focused on reading, writing, mathematics, and school homework empowered the teachers to do their own job both effectively and efficiently.

At Jefferson, enactments of parent involvement drew upon some aspects of parent partnership models (Epstein, 2001), such as volunteering in school, but did not give the parents the same opportunities to engage in planning, decision-making, and school leadership. The teachers at Jefferson did not talk about or treat parents as partners or intellectual equals, as research has shown is the case at middle class schools (Lareau, 2003). They also did not collaborate with the parents to support home or family goals, as is implied by the term partnership. The parents at Jefferson had little say about the kind of help they could or should provide. Instead, teachers assigned parents tasks that they themselves determined would be helpful to compensate for their lack of teachers’ aides and paraprofessionals. In this way, parents became indispensable *help labor* for the teachers.

It seems that the parent involvement strategies employed by the teachers

mirrored those of White middle class communities, where schools can often rely on financially stable, stay-at-home parents (usually mothers) to carry out clerical duties and instructional labor in the classroom, if need be (Graue, 2005; Lareau, 2000; Moles 1993). What is more, the teachers reflected very little on how they themselves could broaden their own conceptions of parent involvement. They did not mention, for example, how classroom learning might build on learning practices already operant in the children's households or how learning and schoolwork might support home and family cultural practices, as recommended by empowerment models (Moll, 1994; Valdés, 1996). Perhaps if the teachers at Jefferson did not have to emphasize testing so much, or if they had the resources they needed, including teachers' aides and paraprofessionals, they may have considered establishing teacher-parent relationships whose purpose went beyond simply meeting the basic curricular demands mandated by the school district.

### Implications

While this qualitative interview study is limited to one inner city California school, the narrative data provides many useful insights for urban teachers and teacher educators. First, it is important for teachers to be cognizant of the fact working class parents often hold positions that do not allow for days off without wage loss. Second, in communities where parents face many challenges, teachers should avoid using exceptionally involved parents, such as Wanda's mother who volunteered at the school after working a nightshift at the hospital, as the standard of parental involvement. Using some parents as exemplars not only discounts the challenges of parenting in poor communities, but ultimately may set up unreasonable expectations for parents with limited access to financial and familial resources, such as childcare, that facilitate involvement. An additional danger of normalizing exceptional parents is that those who do not measure up may appear to be uninterested in their children and apathetic about education, when in fact that may not be the case. Finally, the heavy reliance on parents as *help labor* masks the lack of resources available to teachers. Rather than using parents simply to meet curricular demands, teachers should give serious thought to how they can come together with parents in order to jointly accomplish sustained change. For example, instead of relying on parents to assist them with special education students, teachers at Jefferson could have worked with parents to pressure the district into providing trained paraprofessionals. This is not to say that teachers should discourage necessary parental help. Instead, it is a call for urban teachers to consider parental involvement as a broad range of activities that go beyond *help labor*.

In order to establish broad, democratic parental involvement, both preservice and in-service teacher education must place greater emphasis on how teachers can negotiate their relationships with parents from various social backgrounds. Coursework on diverse families and children may help teachers gain an added

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appreciation for socioeconomic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, as well as dispel negative assumptions about minority and low-income parents’ lives, thus paving the way for healthy communication between teachers and parents (DeCastro-Ambrosetti & Cho, 2005). What is more, teacher educators should work with teachers to examine local meanings of involvement and possibilities alongside parents, rather than implementing “how to” programs *for* parents or *in spite of* them. Local constructions of parent involvement, stand in opposition to “parent partnership” models (Epstein, 2001), which incorrectly assume that teachers and parents have the same decision making power (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Teacher education coursework should also explore parental involvement models that illustrate shared governance with parents, so that parents are not only *help labor*, but also invested decision-makers.

Rather than relying on parents as *help labor*, educators should consider organizing with parents so as to develop unique collaborations that can provide low-income parents and schools with necessary educational resources. To do this, schools themselves need to change the participatory structures they offer low-income parents of color (Auerbach, 2007; Brandon, 2007). Additionally, middle class models that construct the role of parents as “supporters, helpers, and fund raisers” are not reflective of democratic principles and thus, should be replaced by approaches in which parents are participating as “decision makers, partners, and collaborators” (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2001, p. 87). By broadening their operative definitions of parent involvement and work, teachers and parents can pressure urban school districts to provide the proper resources for in class instruction. In doing so, both parents and teachers can build collaborative and reciprocal alliances, that in the end, forefront children’s learning.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> I have used pseudonyms for the school, principal, teachers, parents, and students in all cases throughout this article.

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